Anyone wishing to study and assess realistically the medical aspects of Mediterranean society in the Middle Ages has no other choice but to check authentic, practical knowledge, like that which can be extracted from the prescriptions, lists of *materia medica* (M.M.), and medical letters found in the Cairo Genizah. Such information uniquely and exclusively enables us properly to understand medieval medicine in general and practical medicine in particular in that period.

As mentioned in the introductory chapters, this book is concerned mainly with one aspect of the history of medicine of the Jewish community of Cairo (as a reflection of eastern medieval societies), namely the practical uses of natural substances for medicine. Sources for such research of a medieval community are extremely rare since all records of practical medicine naturally vanish over the years, and only some medical books, which expound theoretical medicine, were recurrently used, sold, or kept in libraries, hence have survived to the present day.\(^1\)

Medical treatment usually began with a patient visiting a physician in his clinic, continued with the latter writing a prescription, which was subsequently prepared by a pharmacist at his pharmacy. In other cases the physician saw patients in a rented room at the back of the pharmacy.\(^2\) The prescription stage is usually missing from historical records for various reasons: in some cases the physician made up the formula himself so no prescription existed, but in most cases there was presumably no reason to keep the prescriptions, and they were torn up or thrown away.

It was possible to realize the goal of reconstructing and studying the practical application of M.M. by the Genizah people only due to the peculiar habit of the members of this community to gather all written documents and keep them in the attic of their synagogue; they did so on the basis of an unwritten religious law. Another factor is the dry

---

\(^1\) Alvarez-Millan, Practice.

\(^2\) Isaacs & Baker, p. xiv.
climate of Old Cairo, which contributed much to the preservation of the fragments for more than a thousand years. These circumstances have enabled us, to date, to trace 140 prescriptions, three letters, and the remnants of 71 M.M. lists, most of which were inventories of pharmacies drawn up for the purpose of forming or dissolving partnerships, commercial orders, and taxation.

In this chapter we discuss mainly three groups of documents according to their contribution to our knowledge of medieval medicine, understanding its practice, and the uses of medicinal substances: the groups are prescriptions, M.M. lists, and medical letters. Other outcomes from the study of these documents will be considered here as well. Chapter 5 concerns the practical M.M. inventory, which is based on the above documents, the theoretical inventory, which is based on medieval medical books found in the Genizah, their analysis and comparison, and other related subjects.

A. Cairo Genizah prescriptions: their importance and contribution to the research

Prescriptions were written by physicians after seeing the patient; the recipe (formula) would be made up by pharmacists. One hundred and forty unique original prescriptions were found in the Genizah collection at Cambridge University Library; of these, forty prescriptions were more or less complete. A few more were discovered in other collections.

In most cases they are written in Arabic script (92) or Arabic written in Hebrew script (Judaeo-Arabic) (47), the most widely used languages and dialects in the daily life of medieval Cairo. Very rarely Hebrew (1) or Judaeo-Persian (1) is found. In a few cases\(^3\) the prescription is written in Judaeo-Arabic but the benedictions that open and close it are written in Arabic script.

In one case, the same formula is written in Judaeo-Arabic on one side of the sheet and in Arabic on the other.\(^4\) In another case two similar versions of the same formula, written in Arabic and headed \(ma'\jún hibat\) \(Allāh\), are found on the same side of a fragment.\(^5\)

---

\(^3\) E.g., T-S Ar.30.305; see figure 4.
\(^4\) T-S AS 155.365; see figure 5.
\(^5\) T-S Ar.34.305.